

On the Effectiveness of Flipped Instruction on Iranian EFL Learners' Appropriate Use of Request and Refusal

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of flipped instruction on the Iranian upper-intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' appropriate use of request and refusal. The participants of the study included 60 upper-intermediate EFL learners from a language institute in Tehran, Iran, who were selected through the Quick Placement Test (QPT) from a total of 80 learners who were originally picked up based on convenience sampling in the form of two intact classes. Then, the two classes were randomly assigned to two groups namely, flipping group and control group. The two groups were subjected to 12 treatment sessions wherein instruction on the appropriate use of request and refusal was offered to the flipping group through explicit flipped instruction and to the control group through non-flipped instruction. The instruments used to collect the data included the Quick Placement Test (QPT) and Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT). The results showed that flipped instruction significantly affected the EFL learners' appropriate use of request and refusal. According to the findings, EFL teachers are recommended to use flipping methods in an attempt to enhance EFL learners' appropriate use of request and refusal.

Keywords: flipped instruction, pragmatics, refusal, request, speech acts

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1. Introduction

An obvious manifestation of the use of technology in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is flipped learning. Flipped learning includes a learning model in which students first learn the online course materials, then their questions are answered by the teacher in the guided discussion and experiments during the classroom (Lin & Chen, 2016). Flipped instruction is under the effect of the internet and information technology (Lin & Chen, 2016). In flipped instruction, the traditional role of teachers as being a knowledge provider shifts to a facilitator and coordinator of the students' learning process. Additionally, students' role shifts from the copying and memorization model to self-initiating learner model (Kvashnina & Martynko, 2013). Flipped instruction seeks to motivate and engage students interactively through presenting new information outside of class and focusing on higher level cognitive learning together with the teacher, in class (Kvashnina & Martynko, 2013).

Furthermore, pragmatic competence is an essential skill for every language teacher and learner in EFL contexts. Pragmatics can be defined as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (Crystal 1997, p. 301). As Trosborg (1995) pointed out, pragmatics which is a Greek word with the original meaning of any kind of activity or affair, is either related to semiotics in the language (its signs or symbols), or a field of language study which is mostly concerned with the context in which language users are using the language, and speakers and listeners' behavior in communicative interactions.

According to Levinson (1983), studying pragmatics includes at least five main areas of speech acts, deixis, presupposition, conversational implicature and conversational structure. A functional subcomponent of pragmatic competence is the use of speech acts which is considered as an important research area because of the attention to pragmatic competence as the second facet of language competence (Kasper, 2000). Moreover, speech acts play an important role in the appropriate use of language according to context. Speech act knowledge consists of language user's sociocultural knowledge and his/her sociolinguistic knowledge (Sadri et al., 2018, p. 21). Moreover, according to Austin (1962), communication is a series of speech acts to bring about some effect on the environment of hearers and speakers. Leech (1983) states that the main role of speech acts is "avoiding disruption and maintaining the social equilibrium and friendly relations" (p. 23).

According to Sadri, Allami, and Rezai (2018), speech acts are among the problematic aspects of EFL learning for learners. This is evidenced by repeated learners' failure to use them appropriately in different contexts. EFL learners, most of the time, fail to communicate with native speakers for their lack of the ability to use appropriate language based on the situation and context (Sadri et al., 2018). Among different speech acts, request and refusal are more frequent in everyday communication based on the current literature (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2021; Malmir & Taji, 2021; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2015; Trosborg, 1995) and accordingly, worth investigating. As stated in Searle's (1976) classification of

illocutionary speech acts, the request is a directive speech act through which the speaker asks the hearer to do something. According to Searle (1976), refusal was defined as a type of speech act that is uttered by a speaker to indicate 'no' to a request, invitation and suggestion. In this study, the use of request and refusal was operationalized through a multiple-choice written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT).

However, the fact is that although the number of advocates of flipped learning and educators showing interest in the topic is increasing, there is no consensus on the matter that using this technique will result in success; in other words, flipping lessons have led to contradicting results in different fields including science, technology, engineering, math, etc. (Moranski & Kim, 2016). Moreover, the volume of research on the use of flipped classrooms in language lessons is not rich (Kvashnina & Martynko, 2016). The mentioned controversy of the findings on the effectiveness of flipped instruction coupled with the research paucity in this regard shows the need for more investigations in this research area.

Furthermore, in spite of the mentioned significance of the use of speech acts in the quality of classroom communication and interaction and learners' problems with the appropriate use of prevalent speech acts, and contrary to the prevalence of flipped instruction in many developed educational systems throughout the World, to the best knowledge of the researcher, few studies have dealt with the appropriate use of speech acts in flipped classrooms in the Iranian context. As an attempt to fill this gap, this study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. Does flipped instruction significantly impact the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' appropriate use of refusal?
2. Does flipped instruction significantly impact the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' appropriate use of requests?

2. Literature Review

In the study by Al-Harbi (2015), the pragmatic competence of learners in EFL contexts was examined as affected by flipped classrooms. As revealed by the results, the flipped group significantly performed better than the control group in the DCT. Hazaimah and Altakhaineh (2019) investigated the impact of flipped instruction on the pragmatic competence of EFL learners. They showed that flipped classroom instruction was effective in a positive direction in increasing the level of pragmatic competence of EFL students. Moreover, in the study by Haghighi et al. (2018), the effectiveness of flipped classrooms on EFL learners' appropriate use of refusal was inspected. It was shown that flipped classrooms had a positive effect on the appropriate use of refusals among the participants. The same findings were reported in the studies conducted by Alsmari (2020), Al-Harbi and Alshumaimeri (2016), Al-Zahrani (2015), Amiryousefi (2017), Ekmekci (2017), Chen Hsieh et al. (2017), and Hung (2017). That is, all these studies reported that the flipped group learners consistently outperformed their control group counterparts in English language pragmatics.

In another study by JoshaghanNezhad and Bagheri (2018), the influence of flipped instruction on EFL learners' academic motivation and learning was probed. It was indicated that both motivation and learning of EFL learners were positively impacted by flipped instruction. Kaviani, Liaqatdar, and Zamani (2017) explored the process of learning in a flipped classroom. The findings showed that the main concern of students in the flipped classroom was active learning, as affected by a variety of factors such as motivation, learning strategies, and personal, educational, organizational and cultural factors.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study included 60 male upper-intermediate EFL learners from a language institute in Tehran, Iran who were selected through the Quick Placement Test (QPT) as a homogenization test from a total of 80 learners who were originally picked up based on convenience sampling in the form of two intact classes. More specifically, those learners whose QPT scores were in the score range of 40-47 were selected as the main sample of the study. As mentioned in research textbooks (e.g., Ary et al., 2019), this sample size is considered acceptable for educational research. The age range of the learners was between 20-26. The two classes were assigned to two groups namely, the experimental group (N=30) and the control group (N=30).

3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were applied to collect the required data: The Quick Placement Test (QPT), and a multiple-choice Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT).

• QPT

The standardized Quick Placement Test (QPT), developed by Oxford University Press and the Cambridge ESOL Examination Syndicate, was employed to ensure the homogeneity of the participants regarding their language proficiency. This test includes 60 multiple-choice items (20 grammar items, 20 vocabulary items, and 20 cloze test items).

• Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT)

A multiple-choice Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT), adapted from Birjandi and Rezaei (2010), and Tajeddin and Bagherkazemi (2014) was used to measure the participants' appropriate use of refusal and request. This test consisted of 20 multiple choice items (10 items on refusal and 10 items on request). Each item of the test described a situation; there were three responses following each situation; the respondents were asked to read the responses to each situation and decide which one is the BEST in each situation. For the purpose of this study, the whole test was validated by a team of three

EFL university professors. To be more specific, three EFL university professors were asked to comment on the items so that necessary revisions could be made on them. Moreover, it was found to be of a Cronbach's reliability index of .95.

3.3. Procedures

To collect the required data, after sampling and homogenization procedure, first, the WDCT was run in the two groups as the pre-test in 20 minutes. Next, the two groups were exposed to 12 instruction sessions on the appropriate use of refusal and request. In the experimental group, the researcher (as the teacher of the group) recorded video lectures and send them to the participants before each class session. In the recorded videos, some information on the appropriate use of refusal and request was presented by the teacher using figures (shapes) and real-life examples. Moreover, some examples of the inappropriate use of refusal, apology, and request were presented along with their appropriate equivalents. These examples were taken from the existing sources on the speech acts including textbooks (e.g., Searle, 1969) and articles (e.g., Birjandi & Rezaei, 2010). Also, some demonstrations were incorporated into the videos. In demonstrations, the learners were taught how to use refusal, apology, and request speech acts in a step-by-step process. As the demonstrator showed how he also told what he was doing. In addition, some researcher-made PowerPoint files including information on the appropriate use of refusal and request were sent to the experimental groups before class sessions. The content of the PowerPoint files was based on the relevant resources about the use of speech acts including textbooks and articles (e.g., Searle, 1969). The learners were asked to watch the videos and read the PowerPoint files at home before coming to class. In this group, in the class sessions, first, the researcher got feedback from the participants on what they watched in the videos and read in the PowerPoint files. In case any misunderstandings or questions existed, the researcher provided the participants with more explanations. However, the learners in the control group were exposed to mainstream explicit instruction on the appropriate use of refusal and request. That is, in the class sessions, as the placebo, the teacher explicitly explained refusal and request speech acts to them along with some examples of their uses in appropriate contexts. One week after the end of classes, the WDCT was administered to the two groups as the post-test in 20 minutes. To analyze the data, normality tests, descriptive and inferential statistics were used using SPSS21 software. Descriptive statistics included mean, standard deviation and standard error of the mean. Inferential statistics involved independent samples t-tests.

3.4. Design

In line with its objectives and sampling procedure, this study used a quasi-experimental, pre-test, posttest, control group design (Ary et al., 2019).

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the normality test showed that the data were normally distributed at %95 confidence level. This normal distribution showed that for data analysis and mean comparison, parametric tests could be used. First, descriptive statistics was calculated to measure the participants’ appropriate use of refusal and request in the pre-test and post-test, respectively. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Use of Refusal and Request

Group		Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental group (EG)	N	30	30
	Mean	4.70	7.33
	SD	.80	.96
Control group (CG)	N	30	30
	Mean	4.00	5.11
	SD	.60	.82

Table 1 shows that the mean scores obtained for appropriate use of refusal by the experimental and control groups in the pre-test were 4.70 and 4.00, respectively. Moreover, the standard deviation values obtained in the pre-test included .80 and .60. Furthermore, as shown in Table 1, the mean scores of the appropriate use of refusal of the experimental and control groups in the post-test were 7.33 and 5.11, respectively. Moreover, .96 and .82 were obtained as the standard deviations of the two groups in the post-test, respectively.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of The Use of Request

Group		Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental group (EG)	N	30	30
	Mean	4.90	7.33
	SD	.86	.45
Control group (CG)	N	30	30
	Mean	4.30	4.90
	SD	.20	.66

As is seen in Table 2, the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group’s appropriate use of request in the pre-test were 4.90 and .86, respectively. The values for the control group were 4.30 and .20, respectively. Moreover, 7.33 and .45 were obtained as the mean score and standard deviation of the experimental group in the appropriate use of request in the post-test. Additionally, the mean score and standard deviation of the control group in the appropriate use of request in the post-test were 4.90 and .66.

Then, at the inferential level, the two groups' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test were compared with each other through running independent samples t-tests. Table 3 shows the results of independent samples t-test for the use of refusal in the pre-test and post-test.

Table 3
Results of Independent Samples T-Test for the Use of Refusal in the Pre-Test and Post-Test

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.05	.72	.22	1	.42	.19
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	30.65	.01	6.62	1	.00	1.80

As delineated in Table 3, the observed difference between the two groups was not significant ($t=.22, p>.05$). In other words, there was not a significant difference between the two groups in terms of their use of refusal in the pre-test. Next, another independent samples t-test was run to compare the two groups' use of refusal in the post-test. Table 4 shows the results.

As demonstrated in Table 3, there was a significant difference between the two groups ($t=6.62, p<.05$) in their use of refusal in the post-test. Therefore, flipped instruction had a significant effect on EFL learners' appropriate use of refusal.

In the next stage, to compare the two groups' mean scores in their use of request in the pre-test and post-test, two independent samples t-tests were run. Table 4 shows the results of the independent samples t-test for the use of request in the pre-test and post-test.

Table 4
Results of Independent Samples T-Test for the Use of Request in the Pre-Test and Post-Test

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.12	.40	.18	1	.33	.10
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	51.00	.00	14.99	1	.00	.70

As shown in Table 4, the observed difference between the two groups was not significant ($t=.18, p>.05$). In other words, there was not a significant difference between the two groups in their use of requests in the pre-test.

As indicated in Table 4, there was a significant difference between the two groups ($t=14.99, p<.05$) in their use of requests in the post-test. Therefore, flipped instruction had a significant effect on EFL learners' appropriate use of requests.

In discussing the findings, it is worth mentioning that two research questions were addressed in the present study. In this section, the obtained results are justified and compared with the findings of the previous studies.

To answer the first question regarding the effect of flipped instruction on the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' appropriate use of refusal, it was shown that flipped instruction significantly affect Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' appropriate use of refusal in a positive way. To answer the second research question, which dealt with the effect of flipped instruction on the Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners' appropriate use of request, it was revealed that both flipped instructions had a significant effect on the participants' appropriate use of request.

In line with the findings of the present study, Hazaimah and Altakhaine (2019) showed that flipped classroom instruction was effective in raising the level of pragmatic competence among the participants. Also, consistent with this study, Haghighi et al. (2018) investigated the effect of the flipped classroom on EFL learners' appropriate use of refusal and showed a positive effect of the flipped classroom in this regard. Furthermore, the results of the present study are explicitly compatible with the research studies conducted by Al-Harbi (2015), Alsmari (2020), Al-Harbi and Alshumaimeri (2016), Al-Zahrani (2015), Amiryousefi (2017), Ekmekci (2017), Chen Hsieh et al. (2017), and Hung (2017), in which the flipped group learners consistently outperformed their control group counterparts in English language pragmatics.

In justifying the findings, Bishop and Verleger's (2013) constructive learning can be referred to according to which through flipped classroom, higher-order cognitive processes including critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making are stimulated and this motivates language learners to become reflective learners. Based on the current pragmatics literature, better critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills will lead to better use of L2 request and other speech acts (e.g., Derakhshan & Malmir, 2021; Malmi & Derakhshan, 2020). Moreover, the findings can be justified by referring to the argument that flipped classroom significantly leads to more learner participation in-class activities by encouraging active learning among learners, and helping them to use more learning strategies, and this can enhance their pragmatic knowledge (Kaviani et al., 2017; Lai & Hwang, 2016). The effectiveness of the flipped classroom can also be attributed to the quality of time which is spent inside the classroom (Davies et al., 2013; JoshaghanNezhad & Bagheri, 2018). To be more specific, in traditional classrooms, a high amount of class time is devoted to teacher lecture and explanations, with little time for the communicative use of the speech act (Davies et al., 2013). Another possible reason for the findings can be that implementing flipped classrooms improves learners' motivation to work cooperatively and engage in collaborative learning, and consequently learn self-directed learning skills (Chau & Cheng, 2010). In addition, the findings can be justified by referring to the reasoning made by Chau and Cheng (2010), according to which flipped classrooms help students be more informed, independent and autonomous, and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and it promotes communication between students and teachers. The same argument has been put forth by Khadjieva and Khadjikhanova (2019).

The findings can also be attributed to the increased motivation of learners in the flipped classroom (JoshaghanNezhad & Bagheri, 2018; Katchamat, 2018; Khadjieva & Khadjikhanova, 2019), which may have caused significant improvements in learners' pragmatic knowledge. As another justification for the

findings, it can be said that since learners have a positive attitude toward flipped classrooms, this has led to improvements in their pragmatic knowledge (Chandra & Fisher, 2009; Finkbeiner, 2001; Najmi, 2015).

Also, some opportunities provided by flipping method used such as simplicity of directed guidelines, active learning opportunities, and joint learning settings may help achieve English language acquisition (Gibson, 2008). Also closely related to the findings of the present study, it has been found that flipped classroom model increases student achievement, in turn, it leads to higher willingness to learn the subject (Abu Naba'h et al., 2009; Ahmad & Al-Khanjari, 2011; Ghabanchi & Anbarestani, 2009; Fahmi Bataineh & Barjas Mayyas, 2017; Greene, 2013; Khadjieva & Khadjikhanova, 2019; Sidman-Taveau, 2005). This can also be enumerated as a justification for the findings of the current study.

Moreover, the significant effect of the flipping method on the self-esteem of students can be a justification for the findings (Jan et al., 2017). That is, it is possible that the flipping method has enhanced learners' self-esteem, and this has contributed to higher pragmatic knowledge. The conclusion made by Rastegar and Yasami (2014) according to which flipped classrooms increase the English proficiency of EFL learners can also be taken as a potential reason for the findings of the present study. Another possible reason for the results of this study can be the enhancement of the participants' sociolinguistic constraint awareness and consequent improvement of their pragmatic knowledge as a result of being exposed to flipping methods (Katchamat, 2018).

5. Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that English teachers and learners should benefit from flipped instruction in English classes. Interestingly, since in the existing literature (e.g., Dashtestani, 2013), it has been shown that both teachers and learners have a positive attitude towards such methods and prefer to use them in the English classes, planning and implementing some measures aimed at using the flipping method in English classes are not misplaced. Therefore, it seems that the time has reached for the arrival of more technological instruments which pave the ground for flipped instruction in the English classes in Iran, as supplementary to traditional methods of ELT.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that to encourage students to learn English pragmatics more efficiently than the traditional methods, flipping methods can be used by EFL teachers. However, this can be done overnight since it is required that curriculum planners incorporate the principles of flipped learning in developing future EFL curricula at different levels and settings. This shift might be materialized through planning macro-level strategies through which technological tools can be utilized in the English classes in the Iranian educational settings. It is hoped that this leads to promising outcomes in learners' participation in classroom activities, motivation, communication with their teachers and peers, etc.

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